

## CANADIAN CHILDREN

## INVITATIONAL

# Young Children's Rough and Tumble Play: Apprehensions and Opportunities

By Michelle Tannock

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## Abstract

Young children in early childhood settings are engaging in rough and tumble play, sometimes to the dismay of the educators seeking to guide their behaviour. The children at play often display expressions of delight, as educators become concerned that someone might get hurt. Rough and tumble play evokes levels of apprehension while also affording opportunities for unique experiences. This article highlights research investigating the rough and tumble play of young children and the perceptions of educators and parents who guide the play. The study resulted in an increased understanding of rough and tumble play for early childhood educators and child development specialists seeking awareness and opportunities to effectively interpret and manage the play.

## Introduction

Understandably, rough and tumble play (R&T) can be a form of play which educators can find difficult to interpret. Since the play behaviours of rough and tumble so often mimic aggressive play (Humphreys & Smith, 1984; Reed & Brown, 2000; Tannock, 2008), there is a tendency for educators to modify or pro-

hibit the play in early childhood settings. However, with apprehensions about rough and tumble play and the resulting tendency to limit the play, opportunities for social and physical growth are inadvertently limited.

This paper explores some of the apprehensions and opportunities inherent in rough and tumble play. Further, considerations for educators seeking to reach a level of comfort with the play in their childcare settings are discussed. Ideally, this mediated level would meet the needs of all sites and educators.

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*As with definitions of play, there are multiple definitions of rough and tumble play including the variety of behaviours displayed during the play. rough and tumble play is defined as fun, social-interactive behaviour that includes running, climbing, pouncing, chasing and fleeing, wrestling, kicking, open-handed slapping, falling, and other forms of physical and verbal play fighting (Freeman & Brown, 2004; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998).*

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## Rough and tumble play?

The rough and tumble play (R&T) of young children in early childhood settings can be difficult to interpret and effectively manage as educators try to distinguish if behaviours are play or aggression. Educators seeking a clear understanding of what constitutes rough and tumble and effective management of the play need to understand and interpret various forms of play. With clarity on the forms of rough and tumble play and how the play is unique from aggression, educators can implement strategies to effectively manage the play in their settings.

King (1992) recognized that children view play as self-chosen, preferred, and gratifying. As with definitions of play, there are multiple definitions of rough and tumble play including the variety of behaviours displayed during the play. rough and tumble play is defined as fun, social-interactive behaviour that includes running, climbing, pouncing, chasing and fleeing, wrestling, kicking, open-handed slapping, falling, and other forms of physical and verbal play fighting (Freeman & Brown, 2004; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998). The elements of rough and tumble play have been similarly categorized by Reed and Brown (2000) to include fleeing, wrestling, falling, and open-handed slaps, running, play fight-

ing, and chasing. Freeman and Brown (2004), and Lagacé-Séguin and d'Entremont (2006) divide rough and tumble play into two forms: "contact forms (play fighting) and non-contact forms (chasing)" (p. 464).

### Outline of the study

The purpose of this exploratory study was to determine the underlying thoughts of early childhood educators, parents, and young children on the role of rough and tumble play in early childhood settings. The specific questions for this study were: how do educators, young children, and parents respond to rough and tumble play? and, what outcomes would educators, young children, and parents anticipate from the inclusion of rough and tumble play in early childhood curriculum?

Participants in this study were asked their thoughts on rough and tumble play. The term "thoughts" is utilized in this study to mean the opinions, views, feelings, judgments, evaluations, observations, ideals, and beliefs of the participants. Throughout this study, the term "thoughts" means any statement made by the participants as "a product of thinking" (Soukhanov, 1984, p. 1204) about the observations made by the researcher or the questions posed by the researcher.

The participants in this study included 11 educators, 16 parents, and 17 five-year-old children from four licensed daycare centres on Vancouver Island on the Canadian west coast. Setting 1 was a privately owned and operated centre situated in the lower level of a family home in a middle income residential neighbourhood. Setting 2 was operated as a non-profit organization as part of a post-secondary educational institution. Setting 3 was an independent non-profit organization in a purpose built facility located in proximity to government offices. Setting 4 was an independent non-profit society situated in a multi-purpose building located in proximity to residential housing.

The specific questions that guided the interviews of the educators were: (1) What do the programming guidelines of your setting say, if anything, about the inclusion of rough and tumble play? (2) Do you actively attempt to make provision for rough and tumble play in your program? (3) What do you think the children learn when engaging in rough and tumble play? (4) What value do you think rough and tumble play holds? (5) How do your colleagues feel about rough and tumble play?

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The specific questions that guided the interviews of the parents were: (1) Are you aware of any guidelines about the inclusion of rough and tumble play in your child's daycare? (2) In your opinion, what sort of value do you perceive from this sort of play? The specific questions that guided the interviews of the children were: (1) What do you think about rough and tumble play? (2) Are there rules for play at daycare? (3) What happens if you rough and tumble play at daycare? (4) What do your teachers think about rough and tumble play at daycare?

The interview transcripts were then analyzed. The analysis involved grouping the data from the transcripts into common themes, topics, and categories based upon the questions asked by the researcher. "The analysis proceeds by looking for patterns or relationships" (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996, p. 144). The responses were analyzed for patterns

and relationships for each question and for each group of participants (educators, parents, and children) and compared across participant groups. This method of analysis was utilized by Winzer (2003): "after all interviews were recorded, the most common responses were tabulated. Results were determined by calculating the most frequent responses" (p. 18).

### Apprehensions

Concern for the safety of young children in care serves as a foundation for not only the field of early childhood education, but also for the decisions educators make each day. Ensuring children are safe was expressed as the most valuable characteristic of an early childhood setting. In this study, educators routinely described a lack of information about rough and tumble play as a foundation for concern.

### Programming guidelines

The lack of contemplation of rough and tumble play was demonstrated when educators were asked what the programming guidelines of their setting say, if anything, about the inclusion of rough and tumble play. None of the educators provided clear details of what the guidelines of their specific setting were in relation to rough and tumble play. Rather, the educators indicated that they did not know what the guidelines were, that they were unsure of what the guidelines were, or described what they thought the guidelines of their setting might be.

One educator attached a caveat to her response when commenting on the lack of guidelines. This educator stated, "I don't know. I can tell you what they should say. They should say rough and tumble play, as long as everyone is safe, is okay with us if no one gets hurt. That's how kids play because kids are kids." Three educators thought that their setting did have a policy on rough and tumble play but were unsure of what the policy stated. As acknowledged by one of the educators,

"to be quite honest I don't know what the guidelines say. I probably read them when I first started here but I've completely forgotten" and, "actually I don't really know if there is anything." The remaining educators recognized the need for safety in their descriptions of the guidelines on rough and tumble play. One educator stated, "I think safety is a big issue. If it starts to get too rough it's time to put a stop to it. We don't want anybody to get hurt. A little bit of roughhousing is okay but when it starts to get to the point where they're getting carried away it's not safe anymore, we stop it." Another educator stated, "what they say is that mainly the children are safe and that they're not abused in any way by the other children. I know that there's something to the effect that they feel safe and secure."

With a limited reflection of rough and tumble play within center policies, educators are left to interpret and make choices about the inclusion of the play on an independent basis. This can be quite uncomfortable for educators seeking to support the philosophy of their program. Clearly, educators need the opportunity to discuss the display of rough and tumble play amongst children in care. Through discussion, common points of understanding on how rough and tumble is interpreted, including the extent to which the play can be included, can be determined. The question of how rough and tumble is included or excluded was of question for parents as well.

#### ***Parent perceptions of programming guidelines***

The participating parents were asked, "Are you aware of any guidelines about the inclusion of rough and tumble play in your child's daycare?" Nine of the parents responded that they were not aware of any guidelines, five parents indicated that they were aware of the guidelines for rough and tumble play, and two parents thought they knew what some of the guidelines were.

The two parents who responded that they knew some of the guidelines for the inclu-

sion of rough and tumble play made comments that reflected their uncertainty. For example, one parent stated, "I guess they have the basic ones. They're not supposed to do it or they get a timeout. They want them to have fun but not to be out of control." The comments of the parents who indicated that they were aware of the guidelines included details of what the children are not permitted to do. These comments included, "they don't allow it, someone might get hurt" and "the uncalled for stuff is not allowed, the violent stuff. It's the same at any daycare."

Parents need to be made aware of centre policies and guidance strategies employed by educators. However, the role of rough and tumble play has not been effectively conveyed to parents who are left wondering and assuming how the play is being interpreted and managed. Once educators have engaged in discussions on the role of rough and tumble play in their settings, parents should be informed of any developed policy. Equally, the children in care should be made aware of developed guidelines.

#### ***Children's perceptions of programming guidelines***

Each participating child was asked if there were rules for play at school. The children acknowledged that there were rules at school and articulated limits on their play. The participating children conveyed limits in terms of what they are not allowed to do rather than what they are allowed to do. The general rules shared by the children included, "don't yell and scream inside. It might make our ears hurt" and "can't say bad words and secrets are not good."

The rules for play articulated by the children indicated absolute bans on rough and tumble play as detailed by comments such as, "there's no wrestling at school, you're only allowed to do it at home" and "there's rules about no wrestling. No wrestling at daycare." The limitations on physical play were also recognized to include specific details with statements

such as, "no punching each other"; "no hitting and no punching and no kicking"; "no pulling hair either"; "I have a rule, don't kick anyone in the tummy" and "fighting, not allowed."

These comments from the children on the rules for play at their daycare detail and reveal clear limitations on physical and hurtful play. The children are also clear in their understanding of their teacher's interpretation of rough and tumble play. This perception of the children was in contrast, to some degree, with the positions of educators. Where educators promote safe play, young children are more connected with what they are not allowed to do rather than what they should be doing. This interpretation of what is not allowed continued in the discussion of rough and tumble play.

#### ***What children think teachers think about rough and tumble play***

The children were asked what their teachers think about rough and tumble play. Each of the children indicated that their teachers did not approve of rough and tumble play. The children made statements such as, "I know it, I know it, it's not very good" and "it would be bad." These children also clearly conveyed consequences of engaging in rough and tumble play through comments such as, "I don't like it when I play rough because I get sad on a time out"; "sometimes I have to go to the thinking chair" and "you get sent on a time out. It's not an okay thing."

#### ***Children's thoughts on rough and tumble play***

The participating children were asked what they thought about rough and tumble play. The children responded to this question in four ways. First, there were comments on specific games that they play including, "pushing them around" and "ah, I play rough with Ben and I play the pterodactyl game with Jack and those are dead pterodactyls." Second, the children commented on the safety of the play. These comments included, "you

can make someone hurt, they could hurt themselves or they could fall down” and “they could cut themselves.”

The third identified theme included the children’s articulated thoughts on what they should be doing in their play with comments such as, “I know what is a good play. A good play is when you talk to your friends nicely.” The final group of comments included reflections on play with family members such as, “I think that it’s fun with my dad.”

For the children who were interviewed as part of this study, the articulations included comments about the types of games they play, the safety of rough and tumble, how they should be playing, and their play with members of their families. These comments were in agreement with the comments of the parents in this study who noted the need for the play to be safe, for their children to avoid physical contact in their play, and that rough and tumble is not appropriate in early childhood centres. However, not all rough and tumble play is dangerous or in contrast to the promotion of positive experiences for young children. Within rough and tumble play are opportunities for young children to engage in socially and physically interactive play which supports development.

### **Opportunities**

Particularly for young boys, rough and tumble play is an avenue for growth, predominantly from a social perspective. While the play appears to be dominated by physical interaction and experiences, the core of the experience is social. This is the avenue in which young boys can express friendship and kindness within a masculine context. Reed and Brown (2000) discuss gender differences in the expression of caring behaviours amongst children. It was their perception that, “boys and girls have different perspectives on intimate relations and different interpretations with regard to connection and expression of care” (p. 105). Indeed, the authors note that research suggests there may be a relationship between

rough and tumble play and caring friendships. It was the perception of the authors that rough and tumble play may be one of the few socially acceptable ways for males to “express care and intimacy for another male [and it may be that] our culture’s homophobia [supports the need for boys to engage in rough and tumble play as a] camouflage for expressions of intimacy and care” (p. 114).

While rough and tumble play is not the only means by which young boys are afforded the opportunity to engage in social interaction and develop friendships, it is an important avenue for such development. With an understanding of the social opportunities inherent in rough and tumble play educators can interpret the play from this developmental perspective.

### ***Educators’ thoughts on learning through rough and tumble play***

Educators were asked what he or she thought the children learn when engaging in rough and tumble play. One recurring theme was that the children are developing awareness of their physical abilities and the abilities of others. For example, one educator stated, “it’s such good sensory development, and cognitive development because you really get an awareness of your body parts.” This body awareness was recognized by other participants who made statements such as, “they learn about their own abilities, their own bodies, space, the difference between running normally and running and flailing” and, “their own physical strength and ability, I think they gain a greater awareness of themselves and other people.”

### ***Physical limits***

The educators recognized rough and tumble play as a vehicle for children to learn about the limits of physical play with others. One educator stated, “it’s whole body play and it’s a way of being gentle with your body in a way so as not to hurt others. It’s active play without injury” while another comment was, “they learn their own strength, they learn about someone

else’s strength.” This element of learning the limits of physical play is reflected in an educator’s comments when stating, “I think they learn about other people’s body language, about physical proximity, about your own body space, they learn about other people.”

### ***Judgment***

Within the play, the educators detailed, the children are learning judgment in determining the limits of the play. An educator stated, “they learn judgment, when to stop, when it’s getting too far. Yes, judgment I guess. To learn when it’s dangerous, when their play has gone over the top. When a simple game of pass the ball and run after it has turned into a fight. When to stop.” This element of discovering limits was reflected in the following responses: “boundaries and respect, they learn to recognize when they’ve gone too far” and, “how rough to be because there’s a point when it’s not fun anymore and they’re starting to learn that. Some kids have hurt someone else and they’ll say I’m sorry, they’re starting to get it.” One educator identified the educators working with the children in their description of the learning of limits when they stated, “limits, how far can you push the teachers and get away with it, how far you can push your friends before they get mad at you and don’t want to play with you anymore.”

For one educator, personal rough and tumble play experiences guided her comments on what the children are learning. This educator stated, “I think I used to be in the rough and tumble stage and I remember it taught me some skills, some defense skills. How to stand up for myself. I remember being five and six and being rough and tumble. I think it helps the kids to stand up for themselves later on in life, not necessarily right now.”

These educators, as with the parents, commented on learning opportunities in rough and tumble play. The children are, according to the educators, learning social skills as they make judgments about the intentions of other players and learning what their physical abilities and

limitations are. As with social development, physical skills are supported in a variety of experiences in early childhood programs. However, particularly for physically interactive children, the opportunity to experience their physical abilities within a rough and tumble experience affords variety of play experiences which enhances overall development.

### *Educators' thoughts on the value of rough and tumble play*

The participating educators were asked what value they thought rough and tumble play holds. Several of the educators responded to the question with reference to the physical aspects of the play. As detailed by one educator, "I think it's very valuable. It keeps kids active, priceless. You don't want kids sitting down doing nothing all day, pudgy little kids. You've got to keep them active at that age, any age when you're a kid. Being active involves rough and tumble play." Another educator stated, "I say that it has a very high priority. Physical fitness too, it's a big thing now. There's many, many children now growing up who don't have that opportunity for that kind of physical activity, it's just unfortunate." However, not only did educators recognize the value of rough and tumble for combatting obesity, but also for the release of energy and social development.

### *Energy release*

The educators' perception of the play was that it was valuable, "especially for energy release." As one educator indicated, "I think are some boys that need to get that out. And some girls as well, obviously the ones who like to do it. They obviously need that outlet, to roll around and jump around and get crazy." This energy release through the play was identified as influential in the programming of the individual setting by one educator who stated, "it keeps them out so they nap, so they sit still during snack time. How do you expect them to sit still at a table all morning? It burns off their energy so they can focus on the quieter things."

The educator's recognition of the value of energy release, which is connected with the development of endurance and strength, has been demonstrated in early childhood research to be of value for children in educational settings. As detailed by Pellegrini and Smith (1998), "exercise play might, by breaking up cognitive tasks, provide spaced or distributed practice rather than massed practice" (p. 584). This distributed practice might, according to Pellegrini and Smith, help children to attend to cognitive tasks. If children are given opportunities to be physically interactive their ability to attend to cognitive tasks is improved. Educational programs must provide opportunities for large body movement as a functional element of any program or curricular schedule. Especially for young children, the need to be physically interactive at regular intervals is vital. The ability to attend to focused activity is dependent upon opportunities to engage in varied forms of physical interaction, including rough and tumble play.

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### *Social competency*

The educators recognized rough and tumble play as being of value in the development of social competency. One educator noted, "it teaches you control and compassion, how to play together. You're always going to be in contact with people, always in one way or another so you might as well learn to deal with them," while a second educator stated, "definitely there's a social bonding thing

with rough and tumble play." This recognition of the social elements of rough and tumble play was reflected in the statements of an educator who commented, "it's just a large body experience. Being in contact with another human being really cultivates a wonderful feeling. You create a relationship with that person. Developing emotionally, too. And spatial awareness, comfort with people in general."

Children learn about their world and the social expectations of others through play with peers. Peers play an important role as children interact within equal relationships, unlike their relationships with adults. The peer relationships offer opportunities to explore a variety of social behaviours such as disagreement, cooperation, competition, and aggression that might not be experienced in the same way as in relationships with adults (Hartup & Moore, 1990).

The elements of developing social skills were reflected in the comments of three of the educators who identified the limits or boundaries in social interactions as a valuable element of rough and tumble play. One educator stated, "I don't know if it's good to say that they get to know their limits. Like what is rough and tumble and what is over that line, boundaries of what they can do." A second educator observed, "they're learning that everyone has tolerance levels, patience levels, everybody is different" while the third educator commented, "all kids do it and they have to learn what is acceptable and what is not. So if they're doing something and it's not acceptable they're learning what's okay and what's not because somebody is going to come in and say that's not acceptable, you're going to hurt someone, that's not okay. They're learning, I guess, about what's okay and what's not okay, what's acceptable."

The value that educators placed on rough and tumble play was primarily as a means for energy release as highlighted in the surplus energy theory of play (e.g., Pellegrini & Smith, 1998). This view of

rough and tumble play as an outlet for energy release was also commented on by the parents. The adults in this study conveyed the view that physical play serves a valuable role, and is necessary, for young children in order for children to be able to engage in quieter activities.

### *Parents' thoughts on the value of rough and tumble play*

The participating parents were asked what sort of value they thought rough and tumble play holds. For one parent, rough and tumble was not viewed as having value. This parent stated, "it's not valuable. It's too close to aggression and bullying." However, the remaining 15 parents did identify value within rough and tumble play. One of the identified values involved the learning of boundaries, as can be seen in comments such as, "it's valuable, it's good for helping children learn to set limits and boundaries" and "it's good for them to learn how far they can go with people, to learn boundaries."

When considering the connection between rough and tumble play and aggression, misunderstanding often influences perceptions. According to Reed and Brown (2000), aggressive behaviour involves anger and intent to cause harm, unlike the playful nature of rough and tumble play. Reed and Brown recognized the play face as an important indicator when determining the nature of physical play. Children who engage in rough and tumble play are smiling, where aggression is accompanied by angry facial expressions. Further, children participating in rough and tumble play have open hands where aggressive children will clench their fists during physical contact. These emotional expressions and actions are indicators of intent to engage in play or be aggressive.

The responses of parents demonstrate understanding of the value of rough and tumble play, yet also provide a glimpse into the misunderstanding of the play. Parents, particularly those who were not

rough and tumble players as children, may interpret the play as aggressive due to the mimicking feature of the play. Educators can support parent interpretation of the play by providing information in a newsletter or via a presentation during a parent information session. Some parents may need additional information on rough and tumble play which can be effectively conveyed by educators.

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### *The participating parents were asked what sort of value they thought rough and tumble play holds.*

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#### *Energy release*

The participating parents mirrored the educators in consideration of the physical nature of rough and tumble play which was detailed as valuable in comments such as, "it's an outlet for energy. It's a huge value" and "it helps them develop their physical skills and is good for keeping them in shape physically." Another value identified was the enjoyment of the play as reflected by one parent, "it's fun. I don't know, it's fun, it's important to have fun when they're little. If he is enjoying it, that's cool." Another parent recognized the building of relationships when stating, "my son and his dad have a different relationship because of rough and tumble play. My son sees his dad as his friend because they rough and tumble play."

#### *Confidence*

For four of the parents, the value of rough and tumble play is reflected in a developing confidence within the players. The comments of these parents included, "I think it helps children to gain confidence in themselves. They learn what their strengths are and their physical limitations"; "it makes them more sure of themselves so others don't take advantage of them"; and "it's part of

a lot of team sports and can help to make kids tougher. They feel more competent when they can play rough without being aggressive. It builds confidence."

#### *Ideals*

The variety of values associated with rough and tumble play were reflected in the comments of two of the parents. The first stated,

"they learn about boundaries. They learn to empathize and to anticipate what other people are going to do. They have fun with it. It's a physical contact that's reassuring of their relationship with mom and dad. It's a chance for them to test their limits but it's not so passive and cozy."

The second parent detailed,

"First, it's a good opportunity to explore social interfacing. They learn what's appropriate and fun versus what is hurtful to others. Second, there's the physical learning. They learn to control their bodies. And third, it's a fun activity for him. He gets lots of attention from me and lots of physical contact. He needs that. We also do the nurturing touching as well with hugs and back rubs. But he needs the physical, playful touching that comes with rough and tumble play."

The comments indicate that 15 of the 16 parents interviewed (94%) place value on rough and tumble play. These parents were able to articulate how rough and tumble play enhanced their child's play experiences and supported personal growth within social contexts. This value in rough and tumble play was congruent with the educators in this study. Both groups claim there is value in the participation in rough and tumble play by young children. The social benefits of rough and tumble play were recognized by Kranowitz and Miller (2006) to aid in the development of skills such as give and take, taking turns, cause and effect, and playing by the rules.

However, the parents in this study did not appear to have communicated their thoughts to the early childhood educa-

tors. Moreover, parents routinely viewed rough and tumble play as inappropriate for daycare due to the concern of injury and the appropriateness of the play in this environment. Educators conveyed similar concerns for rough and tumble play at daycare. The inconsistency between acceptable home and centre behavior can prove difficult for young children to effectively manage. Young children are inherently drawn to rough and tumble play. The question for educators is how to mediate a comfortable level of the play.

### *Finding a level of comfort*

Unquestionably, rough and tumble play within early childhood settings is an uncertain encounter for educators, particularly within a female dominated context. Rough and tumble play tends to be a male dominated activity. Reed and Brown (2000) recognized that research on rough and tumble play has been dominated by a focus on the play of boys. This form of play tends to be misunderstood by females (Reed & Brown, 2000). As a result, boys engaging in rough and tumble play in early childhood settings stand a greater risk of being reprimanded for engaging in the activity. This is not a malicious act on the part of the female educators; rather, according to Reed and Brown, it is an action based on misunderstanding.

The participating educators were asked if they actively attempt to make provision for rough and tumble play in their program. Of the eleven educators, four stated that they do make provisions for the play. The comments of the educators ranged from, "I think so" to "yes we do, we certainly do... we do make provision for that." Another educator stated,

"I think the fact that there's a lot of free play time outside is the centre's provision for physical activity. They use nice names like gross motor activity but it really is the provision for letting off steam and letting the children really get out there and do things uninterrupted. That's when you gen-

erally see the more rough and tumble play. And not that it's not supervised, but the children have more freedom outside. There's more rules about running and jumping and all those things you can't do inside. Yes, I think that it's provided for in that way."

Three of the participating educators stated that rough and tumble play was not actively provided for in their programs. Of the three educators who stated that rough and tumble was not provided for, two were the only participants from Setting 4 and one was from Setting 3 where one co-worker detailed that they do provide for rough and tumble play. The comments from the educators who acknowledged that they do not provide for rough and tumble play included, "we don't encourage it, no" and "we don't, I don't think, if they do start it's usually stopped." The third educator stated, "no, it just happens. But when it gets too rough we try to settle it down."

Two educators commented that they will adapt the program to include elements of rough and tumble play even though they did not state that they actively attempt to make provision for the play. One educator stated, "not to the extent where they are rough, pushing and shoving. When they are outside they've got room to run and play and roll around." The second educator explained, "on a day when it's crazy we'll say let's get outside, let them run around a bit."

Two of the educators commented that while they would like to provide for rough and tumble play in their program, circumstances have prevented them from doing so. The first of these two educators stated, "I used to and then I was rough and tumble playing with a child and I knocked their head on the wall and that was the end of that. She had a big bruise and welt on her face so that was basically it for me. I don't do it anymore." The second educator detailed, "I would but I'm also a new educator here so I'm not setting up my own program necessarily."

### *'The other staff' and rough and tumble play*

The participating educators were asked how the staff with whom they work felt about rough and tumble play. Of the eleven educators, two commented that rough and tumble is discouraged. These educators stated, "they discourage it pretty quickly" and, "I think they probably all think it's not highly valued. Maybe we're not educated enough on it I would say because it's stopped so quickly." Eight of the remaining nine participants made similar responses when commenting on how the other staff feel about rough and tumble play. The common element of these participants' responses was that rough and tumble play is acceptable as long as children are not being hurt.

Differences were noted among the educators in how they phrased their responses. Five of the educators phrased their responses in a positive tone such as, "I like it. I think we all have the same thought on it. We all like it as long as it's not too rough. As long as no one's getting hurt. As long as everyone's safe I think we all have the same thoughts." Another educator responded, "we just basically know the key ones who would really rough and tumble and we make sure somebody's in that vicinity with them. You can't really stop them. I think we're all kind of on that same, hopefully we're all on the same page." Additional comments included, "you know I think we pretty much agree and work as a team to foster good, positive rough and tumble play" and, "if the children are being respectful and no one's getting hurt then we are okay."

Three of the educators commented that, while respecting the play, they viewed rough and tumble play as needing to be controlled. The comments from these participants included, "just that if it starts to get out of hand then it's either slowed down to more acceptable level or they're redirected to find something else" and, "I think we just basically agree that it can only go so far. When somebody starts pushing and shoving where there's danger of somebody getting hurt it's got to

stop.” This element of respecting the play while also expressing concern for the safety of the children involved echoed through the interviews.

One educator, however, recognized that staff play a significant role in how rough and tumble play is managed in their setting. This educator stated, “I think we all know that it’s part of the child’s day, that it’s going to occur. I think it depends too on staff, how they are feeling that day. If they’re having a bad day, it’s harder to cope with it. We have to cope with it but if you’re having a stressful day, you can’t tolerate it quite as well. But we all know it’s important, we all know it occurs.” However, the educators commented that they do not regularly speak with one another about rough and tumble play. Rather, the educators responded to physical play when it appeared that someone might get hurt.

#### *Staff discussions and comments on rough and tumble play*

The educators were asked if the staff at their setting ever discussed or made comments about rough and tumble play. The responses of the educators can be categorized into three groups: those who have not made comments or discussed the play, those who discuss the play on an incidental basis and those who have discussed rough and tumble play in a more formal atmosphere such as a staff meeting. Six of the educators stated that they had not entered into discussions with the staff from their setting. Comments from these educators included, “I don’t remember ever having a talk about it” and, “not since I’ve been here, not that I recall.”

Two of the educators stated that they have talked about rough and tumble play with their fellow staff on an incidental basis. These comments reflect the daily events of a setting such as, “so and so is very, really energetic today so you’re kind of monitoring them more.” One educator detailed that they talk with the other staff about the rough and tumble play in specific situations. This educator remarked,

“we’ll watch what’s happening with the kids and say that’s borderline or do you want to step in or not. If someone comes out and sees a situation that’s developed into something that they go ‘oh, that’s rough’ then the person who’s been watching the whole situation can say ‘well, actually, it’s just a game and this is how they’re playing and it’s okay and under control I’ve got my eye on it.”

The remaining three educators described discussions that appeared more formalized. One educator spoke of lunchtime discussions when they stated, “sometimes if things are getting really rough... we’ll talk among ourselves at lunchtime and we’ll say this day is going to be something else. So we know it’s coming so we discuss it with each other, we are all more aware and actively watching.” This meeting of staff to discuss rough and tumble play was detailed by another educator who reflected, “sometimes at our room meetings we’ll say that they’re wild and crazy. It’s more on a daily basis. So if it happens, if it occurs, we try and accommodate for some of it. We don’t want the whole day rough and tumble though.”

The educators commented that they did not engage in planning conversations about rough and tumble play. Rather, the conversations the educators reported did have about physical play resulted from difficulties arising from the play. The educators participating in this study responded to rough and tumble play rather than actively providing for the play.

Reed, Brown and Roth (2000) interviewed early childhood educators and elementary teachers on rough and tumble play. The findings of this research concluded that rough and tumble is a continuing concern, yet rough and tumble continued to exist despite efforts to eliminate it. The main factors influencing negative attitudes to rough and tumble include the dominance of female staff, concerns about injury, difficulty distinguishing rough and tumble play from aggression, and attitudes about play from a gender and educational perspective.

These identified concerns are likely to continue due to increased cautiousness related to liability injury within educational settings; concerns about the impact of media in promoting aggression amongst children and the imitation of media during role play while in school (Sherburne et al 1988; Reed, Brown & Roth, 2000) and the promotion of strategies to managing challenging behaviours in educational settings (Powell, Dunlap, & Fox, 2006). As detailed in these studies, educators are interacting with a complex dynamic of ensuring developmentally appropriate and supportive environments and externally influenced positions of concern. There is a need for educators to plan for discussions on the influence of the media or community interpretations of the impact of group care on individual children.

#### *Children’s thoughts on what happens if they engage in rough and tumble play at school*

The children were asked what happens if they rough and tumble play at daycare. The responses of the children fell into two main categories. First, the children stated that they would be reprimanded. Second, there were comments that some children would get hurt from the play. In both cases the children were quite certain about their responses. The children commented on the behavioural consequences from the play and focused on injury as a consequence of the play.

The comments of the children included, “if you do it then you’re going to get in trouble and have a timeout.” This position was supported by additional comments such as, “you get sent on a timeout” and “and on a chair.” While one child provided a context to their answer when stating, “if I kick someone in the face, then I will go on a timeout.” For the participating children in this study, a focus on the possibility of getting hurt as noted in the comments such as, “we’ll get hurt.”

The comments from the children in this study reflect two common perceptions on the results of rough and tumble play: that they will be reprimanded and they



may be hurt in the play. However, as demonstrated in the comments on the value and learning inherent in rough and tumble play, the result of engaging in rough and tumble play can be beneficial within the context of normative development. It is this paradox which holds rough and tumble play in an uncertain space, with inherent value yet perceived concerns. Yet, researchers and educators must consider the developmental impact of excluding rough and tumble play from a child's experiences. Research conducted by Pellis and Pellis (2007) resulted in recognition that the lack of rough and tumble play resulted in organizational changes in the brains of young rats. Pellis and Pellis related their findings to the development of young children when noting that, "it may not be the case that the more socially competent children engage in more play fighting, but rather that the play fighting may promote the development of social competency" (Pellis & Pellis, 2007, p. 97).

Educators need to be able to respond to rough and tumble play from an informed position as it is both an opportunity for development and a form of play which can cause concern or apprehension. The benefits from a social and physical development perspective should not be overlooked and must be considered within the framework of concerns.

The choices educators make in how they respond to young children engaged in this play is an area which can be prepared for. Through the utilization of standard observation techniques, educators are able to create a plan which not only supports the developmental benefits, but also ensures the safety and well-being of the children. A standard method for reconsideration of play behaviours should begin with a period of observation in order to fully understand the extent and form of the rough and tumble play within programs. As with any sequence of observations, educators should ensure that recordings of behavior are made over a course of several days encompassing varied aspects of the program, particularly outdoor play and transitions. With data in hand, educators

can examine behavioural manifestations in order to determine if the play is causing harm or is a positive experience for the children. It may be that the aggressive mimicking of rough and tumble play is resulting in premature limits being palced on the play.

When educators consider the developmental benefits of rough and tumble play in conjunction with the actual behaviours displayed, effective planning for the play can occur. Such planning results not only in common policies and procedures which can be communicated to parents, but also with a common framework in which educators can guide the play.

### Conclusion

Scott and Panksepp (2003) recognized that rough and tumble play encourages children to learn and to develop pro-social behaviours. As educators develop an awareness and understanding that rough and tumble does not involve aggression, they may be able to develop a more positive perspective on this form of play. Rough and tumble play is not an event which educators are typically comfortable with. However, educators need to be able to deconstruct what forms the basis for the discomfort. If the play is uncomfortable for educators there will be a natural tendency to discourage the play, to redirect and avoid the tumbles despite the accompanying laughter. Yet, educators can take an active approach as they consider what is of concern and how the play can become more acceptable. A change in venue, a limit on the form of physical interaction, and an understanding of the developmental necessity of rough and tumble play will aid educators in recognizing value within the play.

Educators are understandably uncertain of how to effectively manage rough and tumble play in early childhood settings. The uncomfortable experience of guiding the play can lead to a predominance of efforts to eliminate or severely constrain the play. Certainly this is understandable as educators ensure that each child is safe, however, educators also need to keep in mind the loss in terms of developmentally appropriate experi-

ences. Social understanding develops within multiple contexts, over a life span of experiences, including rough and tumble play. It may be that young children, particularly boys, will gain the understanding gained during rough and tumble play through other experiences. However, if physical play is consistently limited or modified, the loss of experience will impact social cognition. It may be that the benefits of rough and tumble play may serve as the catalyst for educators to seek opportunities to include the play within early childhood settings.

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